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CERTAIN PRE-COLUMBIAN NOTICES OF AMERICAN ABORIGINES¹

By WILLIAM H. BABCOCK

IT may be best to take up these old stories and statements in geographical, rather than chronological, order, beginning with the region which faces Iceland and is nearest to Europe.

THE EASTERN COAST OF GREENLAND

The Floamanna Saga, attributed by Vigfusson in its older parts to the thirteenth century, with some revision and additions in the fourteenth, relates the voyages and adventures of the notable hero Thorgisl a little before the opening of the eleventh century. Eric the Red had invited him from Iceland to Greenland, but his party, the saga tells us, "wrecked their ship one day under the mountain glaciers of Greenland in a certain bay upon a sand bank. . . . They all made a hall together"—for winter quarters; but it proved a very gruesome home, for one after another went mad and died and the living fancied themselves haunted by the dead. Later, Thorgisl's wife was stabbed to death in bed beside her child and there were divers soul-trying and even preternatural experiences.

For one thing:—

In the morning, when Thorgisl came out, he saw a great mass of drift in an ice hole and by it there were two giant women in kirtles of skin and they were trussing up mighty burdens. Thorgisl ran up and cut at one of them with his sword, Earth House Loom, as she was bearing the burden on her back and slashed off her arm close to the shoulder. Down fell the burden and she ran away.

The subsequent course of Thorgisl and the remnant of his people in reaching the established Greenland settlements on the southwestern side leaves no doubt that this occurrence took place, or was understood to have taken place, on the rarely attempted icebound eastern face of Greenland. Apparently, these misunder-

¹ Read before the Anthropological Society of Washington.

stood and exaggerated women, clad in skins and gathering driftwood bundles, were simply Eskimo of that region. The occurrence may very well have been a real one.

WESTERN SHORE OF GREENLAND

The surviving libellus or abridgment of Are Frode's lost *Islandingabok*, which stands at the very beginning of Icelandic literature and was composed in the twelfth century, informs us:—

The country which is called Greenland was discovered and colonized from Iceland. Eric the Red was the name of the man, an inhabitant of Breidafirth, who went thither from here and settled at the place which has since been called Ericsfirth. He gave a name to the country and called it Greenland and said that it must persuade the men to go thither if the land had a good name. They found there, both east and west in the country, the dwellings of men and fragments of boats and stone implements, such as that it may be perceived from these that manner of people had been there who have inhabited Wineland and whom the Greenlanders call Skrellings.

But these Eskimo had withdrawn and remained aloof for a long time, their characteristics apparently being inferred by the Norsemen from uncertain analogy. Norse hunters and fishers, however, ranged far afield in the northern wilderness above the Western settlement and the game would naturally draw marksmen of the two races together. One such, Thorhall the Hunter, is perhaps the most picturesque figure of the *Saga of Eric the Red*, and is there presented as the author of divers verses, imbedded in the story, which are credited to the eleventh century by their diction and meter. Also, two fragments of lost sagas are cited as relating that the more prosperous Greenland settlers owned ships which went to Nordsetr, apparently the general name for the most northern hunting districts, and maintained huts at two well-known points for something like hunting lodges or seats. One of these parts of the coast was called Greipar and the other Krogsfjordheath. The latter is thought to have been a little above, or a little below, Disko Island; but there is great uncertainty.

The meeting of these widely wandering men with Eskimo hunters similarly engaged is related in a manuscript found in Scotland and considered to be of the thirteenth century. It is

known as the *Historia Norwegiæ* and contains, among other things, a geographical description of northern lands, including the following passage, which, in the opinion of Dr. Storm, may relate to events in the twelfth century, though there are perhaps indications that they belong to a hundred years later.

Beyond the Greenlanders towards the north, (says this manuscript), the hunters come across a kind of small people called Skrellings. When they are wounded alive their wound becomes white without any issue of blood; but the blood scarcely ceases to stream out of them when they are dead. They have no iron whatever and use whale teeth for missile weapons and sharp stones for knives.

It may be inferred that the intercourse between these borderers of competing races was not wholly placid and amiable.

We have also a rather frequently quoted narrative of an Arctic exploring expedition in the year 1266, which seems to have been prompted by uncertain reports of these uncivilized people, with perhaps some disquiet as to their intentions and an intelligent desire to know more about them and the region whence they came. It is contained in *Hauksbók*, a compilation copied out from various earlier writings by and for Hauk Erlendsson, a knight of Norway and lawman of Iceland, some time between the years 1300 and 1334.

This account wrote the priest Holdr from Greenland to the former Greenland priest Arnold, court priest on board the Knorr in which Bishop Olaf traveled to Greenland. That summer when the priest Arnold left Greenland and they suffered shipwreck on the coast of Iceland there were found out in the sea some pieces of timber which had been hewn with small axes or adzes and among them one in which were set tooth wedges and bone wedges.

That summer there came people also from Nordsetr, who had traveled farther north than we had hitherto heard of. They saw no signs that the Skraelings had lived there, except at Krogfordsheath, and it is thought that this must be the shortest way for them to go from wherever they get there. Thereupon the priests sent a ship northward, in order to explore the regions north of the farthest point which they had hitherto visited; but they sailed out from Krogfordsheath until they lost sight of the land. Then they had a south wind against them and darkness and they had to let the ship go before the wind; but when the storm ceased and it cleared up again they saw many islands and all kinds of game, both seals and whales and a great number of bears. They came right into the sea-bay and lost sight of all the land, both the southern coast and the glaciers, but south of them were also glaciers as far as they could see. *They saw signs that the Skraelings had dwelt there in former times*, but on account of the bears they could not

land. Thereafter they sailed back in three days and found some remains of Skraelings on some islands south of Snaefell. Then they sailed southward to Krogfjordsheath, one good day's rowing. St. James' Day (July 25th) it was frosty at night but the sun shone both night and day and was not higher in the south than that when a man placed himself athwart-ships in a six oared boat with his head up against the railing (or gunwale) the shadow of that side which was nearest to the sun would strike his face; but at midnight the sun was as high as at home in the settlement when it is in the northwest. Thereafter they traveled home to Gardar.

There have been various estimates of the distance traveled northward. It would appear that they sailed a long way up Baffin's Bay, touching at several points, but seeing no Eskimo and nothing more than the signs of their former occupancy, such as the Norse Greenlanders of the settlements had seen almost three centuries before near their home.

After this there are accounts of hostilities and the abandonment of the Western settlement in the fourteenth century; also later attacks on the Eastern settlement, all probably indicating a continued or intermittent Eskimo movement down the coast. But they tell us nothing of these people themselves except a greater degree of belligerency than has been usual in recent times.

Perhaps the latest notice of West Coast Eskimo during the Norse period is found in a passage quoted by Thalbitzer from Danish historical records for Greenland, concerning four ships which sailed to Greenland in 1385, spending two winters there, and more particularly the skipper of one of these, one Bjorn Einarson Jorsalafafari. We are told:—

The Greenlanders made Bjorn Bonde a grant of Erichsfjord district while he stayed there. . . . At last he was benefited by the chance that he had happened to rescue two trolls, a young boy and his sister, from a rock which was washed over at high tide. They took an oath of allegiance to him and from that time he did not lack provisions, for they were experienced in all kinds of hunting and fishing, no matter what he needed or desired. The girl-troll considered it the greatest favor when she was allowed to carry and pet the little boy baby which her mistress had just given birth to. She also wanted to wear a head-dress which resembled that of her mistress, but she made it of whale's gut. The brother and sister killed themselves and threw themselves down the cliffs into the sea when they were prohibited from following along with Bjorn Bonde, their beloved master, to Iceland.

MARKLAND, PROBABLY NEWFOUNDLAND

This seems to have been the most frequently visited of all the regions beyond Greenland. At any rate, it is the one of which we have the latest record, that of a small Greenland vessel which reached Iceland in 1347, after having made the Markland voyage. The only Norse reference to the inhabitants of this region seems to be the very early one in the saga of Eric the Red, copied into *Hauksbók* probably about 1320 or 1330, but in parts belonging to the eleventh century, though this particular passage may be less ancient. Of the voyage of Thorfinn Karlsefni and his companions, 1003 to 1006, it relates:—

When they sailed away from Wineland they had a southerly wind and so came upon Markland, where they found five Skrellings, of whom one was bearded, two were women and two were children. They bore the lads away with them and taught them to speak and they were baptized. They said that their mother's name was Vætelldi and their father's Uvaegi. They said that kings governed the land of the Skrellings, one of whom was called Avalldamon and the other Valldidida. They stated that there were no houses there and the people lived in caves and holes.

There has been much discussion as to whether these young Skrellings were Eskimo or Indians. Perhaps the latter is more probable.

They related certain rumors of other people near them, who wore white garments and carried rags on poles and shouted, so that their captors thought it must be Great Ireland, known also as White Man's Land. But this may be disregarded, as at best only hearsay and perhaps merely reflecting the traditions of the Icelandic people about them.

WINELAND AND ITS NEIGHBORHOOD

Another and more tragical encounter occurred apparently on the southeastern shore of the Gulf of St. Lawrence, according to Dr. D. Storm's interpretation of the data supplied by the *Saga of Eric the Red*, before quoted. It was probably at the mouth of the Margarie river or Mabou river, flowing mainly "from the east to the west" out of Cape Breton island.

It happened one morning that Karlsefni and his companions discovered in an open space in the woods above them a speck, which seemed to shine toward them, and it was a Uniped, who skipped down to the bank of the river where they were lying. Thorvald, a son of Eric the Red, was sitting at the helm and the Uniped shot an arrow into his inwards. Thorvald drew out the arrow and exclaimed: "there is fat around my paunch; we have hit upon a fruitful country and yet we are not likely to get much profit of it." Thorvald died soon after from his wound. Then the Uniped ran away toward the north. Karlsefni and his men pursued him and saw him from time to time and it seemed as if he were trying to escape. The last they saw of him he ran down into a creek.

No doubt the Uniped, like the giant women and trolls already mentioned, belonged to some one of the native races.

The later Flatey book narrative, still long pre-Columbian, gives a different version of the killing of Thorvald without any prodigy.

In the spring (after their arrival at Leifsbooths in Wineland) Thorvald said that they should put their ship in order and that a few men should take the after-boat and proceed along the western coast and explore thereabouts during the summer. They found it a fair well-wooded country; it was but a short distance from the woods to the sea and there were white sands, as well as a great number of shallows. They found neither dwelling of man nor lair of beast, but in one of the westerly islands they found a wooden building for the shelter of grain. They found no other trace of human handiwork.

The following summer Thorvald set out toward the east with the ship and along the northern coast. . . . They sailed to a headland which projected into the sea here and was entirely covered with woods. . . . They . . . discovered on the sands in beyond the headland three mounds; they went up to these and saw that they were three skin canoes with three men in each. They thereupon divided their party and succeeded in seizing all the men but one, who escaped with his canoe. They killed the eight men and then ascended the headland again and looked about them and discovered within the firth certain hillocks which they concluded must be habitations. They were overpowered with sleep . . . but awakened by the sound of a cry and a countless number of skin-canoes then advanced toward them from the inner part of the firth; whereupon Thorvald exclaimed: "We must put out the war boards on both sides and defend ourselves to the best of our ability, but offer little attack." This they did, and the Skrellings, after they had shot at them for a time, fled precipitately, each as best he could. Thorvald then inquired of his men whether any of them were wounded and they informed him that no one of them had received a wound. "I have been wounded in my arm-pit" said he, "an arrow flew in between the gunwale and the shield below my arm. Here is the shaft and it will bring me to my end."

After that he was buried in the most edifying way on a headland called Crossness.

This extract blends with the killing of Thorvald, a slaughter of Indians, told as a separate event by the earlier *Hauksbók* saga of Eric the Red, and by another nearly identical version transcribed later. This massacre seems to have occurred on the outer seacoast of America, probably somewhere in New England, during the return of Karlsefni and his party from their abandoned southern home at Hóp to their more northern and chief abiding-place at Straumfjord.

They sailed to the northward off the coast and found five Skrellings clad in skin doublets, lying asleep near the sea. There were vessels beside them containing animal marrow mixed with blood. Karlsefni and his men concluded that they must have been banished from their own land. They put them to death.

But everyway the most notable experience with the natives occurred at the relatively southern nearby land-locked bay or Hóp where Thorfinn's party maintained themselves about a year. The Saga of Eric the Red relates as follows:—

Now one morning early when they looked about them they saw nine skin-canoes and staves were brandished from the boats with a noise like flails and they were revolved in the same direction in which the sun moves. Then said Karlsefni, "What may this betoken?" Snorri's son Thorbrand answers him: "It may be the signal for peace, wherefore let us take a white shield and display it." And this they did, thereupon the strangers rowed toward them and went upon the land, marvelling at those they saw before them. They were swarthy men (or small men according to the later copy, A.M. 557) and ill looking and the hair of their heads was ugly. They had great eyes and were broad of cheek. They rowed away and to the southward round the point.

Karlsefni and his followers had built their huts above the lake, some dwellings were near the mainland, and some near the lake. Now they remained there that winter. No snow whatever came there, and all of the live-stock lived by grazing. And when spring opened, they discovered, early one morning, a great number of skin-canoes rowing from the south past the cape, so numerous, that it looked as if coals had been scattered broadcast out before the bay; and on every boat staves were waved. Thereupon Karlsefni and his people displayed their shields, and when they came together, they began to barter with each other. Especially did the strangers wish to buy red cloth, for which they offered in exchange pelties and quite grey skins. They also desired to buy swords and spears, but Karlsefni and Snorri forbade this. In exchange for perfect unsullied skins, the Skrellings would take red stuff a span in length, which they would bind around their heads. So their trade went on for a time, until Karlsefni and his people began to grow short of cloth, when they divided it into such narrow pieces, that it was not more

than a finger's breadth wide, but the Skrellings still continued to give just as much as before, or more.

It so happened that a bull, which belonged to Karlsefni and his people, ran out from the woods, bellowing loudly. This so terrified the Skrellings, that they sped to their canoes, and then rowed away to the southward along the coast. For three weeks nothing more was seen of them. At the end of this time, however, a great multitude of Skrelling boats was discovered approaching from the south, as if a stream were pouring down, and all their staves were waved in a direction contrary to the course of the sun, and the Skrellings were all uttering loud cries. Thereupon Karlsefni and his men took red shields and displayed them. The Skrellings sprang from their boats, and they met them and fought together. There "was a fierce shower of missiles, for the Skrellings had war-slings." Karlsefni and Snorri observed that the Skrellings raised up on poles a great ball-shaped body, almost the size of a sheep's belly and nearly black in color, and this they hurled from the pole upon the land about Karlsefni's followers, and it made a frightful noise, where it fell. Whereat a great fear seized upon Karlsefni, and all his men, so that they could think of nought but flight . . . for it seemed to them that the troop of Skrellings was rushing toward them from every side, and they did not pause, until they came to certain jutting crags where they offered a stout resistance. Freydis came out, and seeing that Karlsefni and his men were fleeing, she cried: "Why do ye flee from these wretches, such worthy men as ye, when, me-seems, ye might slaughter them like cattle? Had I but a weapon, methinks, I would fight better than any one of you." They gave no heed to her words. Freydis sought to join them, but lagged behind, for she was not hale; she followed them, however, into the forest, while the Skrellings pursued her; she found a dead man in front of her; this was Thorbrand, Snorri's son, his skull cleft by a flat stone; his naked sword lay beside him; she took it up, and prepared to defend herself with it. The Skrellings then approached her, whereupon she stripped down her shift, and slapped her breast with the naked sword. At this the Skrellings were terrified and ran down to their boats, and rowed away. Karlsefni and his companions, however, joined her and praised her valor. Two of Karlsefni's men had fallen, and four of the Skrellings. Karlsefni's party had been overpowered by dint of superior numbers. They now returned to their dwellings, and bound up their wounds, and weighed carefully what throng of men that could have been, which had seemed from the land; it now seemed to them, that there could have been but the one party, that which came from the boats, and that the other troop must have been an ocular delusion. The Skrellings, moreover, found a dead man, and an axe beside him. One of their number picked up the axe, and struck at a tree with it, and one after another (they tested it), and it seemed to them a treasure, and to cut well; and then one of their people hewed at a stone and broke the axe; it seemed to him of no use since it would not withstand stone, so he cast it down.

It now seemed clear to Karlsefni and his people that although the country thereabouts was attractive, their life would be one constant dread and turmoil by

reason of (the hostility of) those who dwelt there before, so they forthwith prepared to leave, and determined to return to their own country.

The Flatey book version of this same experience is as follows:—

In the summer succeeding the first winter Skrellings were discovered. A great troop of men came forth out of the woods. The cattle were hard by, and the bull began to bellow and roar with a great noise, whereat the Skrellings were frightened and ran away with their packs, wherein were grey furs, sables and all kinds of peltries. They fled toward Karlsefni's dwelling and sought to effect an entrance, but Karlsefni caused the doors to be defended. Neither could understand the other's language. The Skrellings put down their bundles and loosened them and offered their wares, but Karlsefni forbade his men to sell their weapons and he bade the women carry out milk to the Skrellings, which they no sooner saw than they wanted to buy it and nothing else. . . . Now it is to be told that Karlsefni caused a strong wooden palisade to be set up around his house. . . . Then said Karlsefni to the women "Do ye carry out the same food which proved so profitable before and nought else." When they saw this they cast their packs in over the palisade. Gudrid was sitting within in the doorway beside the cradle of her infant son Snorri when a shadow fell upon the door and a woman in a black namkirtle entered. . . .

Gudrid heard a great crash, whereupon the woman vanished and at the same instant one of the Skrellings who had tried to seize the weapons was killed by one of Karlsefni's followers. At this the Skrellings fled precipitately, leaving their garments and wares behind them.

Karlsefni planned for the impending attack as follows:—

Ten of our number shall go out on the cape and show themselves there while the remainder of our company shall go into the woods and have a clearing for our cattle when the troop approaches from the forest. We will also take our bull and let him go in advance of us. The lie of the land was such that the proposed meeting place had the lake on one side of it and the forest on the other. The Skrellings advanced to the spot and a battle was fought there, in which great numbers of the band of Skrellings were slain. There was one man among the Skrellings of large size and fine bearing whom Karlsefni concluded must be their chief. One of the Skrellings picked up an axe and having looked at it for a time he brandished it about one of his companions; and hewed at him, and on the instant the man fell down dead. Thereupon the big man seized the axe and after examining it for a moment he hurled it as far as he could out into the sea; then they fled helter skelter into the woods and thus their intercourse came to an end.

There has been much discussion as to whether these Wineland Skrellings were Eskimo or Indians. I think they were Indians.

It has seemed best to confine my notes to Norse sources, as

being the only ones reasonably well authenticated and certainly relating to inhabitants of America. It is well known that there are pre-Columbian Chinese records of the explorations of Buddhist monks, which some have supposed to extend to America; but the better opinion seems to be that only Corea, and perhaps other Asiatic or north-Pacific regions, were visited.

Also, the very puzzling and curious Zeno book, published late in the sixteenth century, purports to be a revival and reconstruction of an early fifteenth century narrative illustrated by a map. It embodies the adventures of a fisherman cast away about 1380 on the coast of Estotiland, probably Newfoundland, with subsequent journeys on the mainland far to the southwest; also the voyage of Earl Zichmi to Greenland and other points, not long after the year 1400. But either the entire document was forged after the time of Columbus or it was so transformed by the sixteenth century Nicolo Zeno, who rewrote and redrew it, that there is no item which we can safely trust. There is merely the possibility that the narrative may contain some real information about the condition of the Eastern Settlement of Greenland not long before its fall and concerning the contemporary population of Newfoundland and Cape Breton island, as well as certain regions below.

WASHINGTON, D. C.